

# Uncovering an Indiana Treasure . . .

## James Whitcomb Riley



James Whitcomb Riley  
By T. C. Steele

*“Little Orphant Annie’s come to our house to stay, An’ wash the cups an’ saucers up, an’ brush the crumbs away, An’ shoo the chickens off the porch, an’ dust the hearth, an’ sweep, An’ make the fire, an’ bake the bread, an’ earn her board-an-keep . . .” – James Whitcomb Riley*

“Little Orphant Annie,” “The Raggedy Man,” “When the Frost is on the Punkin,” “Nine Little Goblins,” and “Out to Old Aunt Mary’s,” are just a few of the many James Whitcomb Riley poems that have enchanted generations. If you live in Indiana, have stayed for any length of time in the state or know a Hoosier, there is a good chance that his name will pop up. Riley and Indiana have lived somewhat hand-in-hand as he defined the “Hoosier Character.” “Where men say Indiana, they say Riley also, as an eloquent synonym— a complete definition of the kindliness and wholesomeness of . . . Hoosier people.” – author Meredith Nicholson. James Whitcomb Riley had a love affair with Indiana, and Indiana with him. He was Indiana’s ambassador to the rest of the United States and, for that matter, to the rest of the English-speaking world. He was a national celebrity in his day, a best-selling author and a renowned performer, but he still held fast to his Indiana roots. Riley is quoted as saying, “As for leaving that city or even the state, no money could tempt me ever to quit my home and my people.”

James Whitcomb Riley was born on Oct. 7, 1849 in Greenfield, Ind. a small town directly east of Indianapolis. His father, Reuben Riley, was a lawyer by trade. Reuben Riley was politically active, serving as Greenfield’s first mayor, and also as a representative to the state legislature. As was common at the time, Reuben’s wife, Elizabeth, was a homemaker and a mother of six, with James being the third eldest. It is most likely that Elizabeth was the inspiration for Riley’s poetry gift. She had a knack for writing verse and frequently contributed to the local papers.

James Whitcomb Riley was called “Bud” as a child. When he was three years old, the Rileys built a beautiful two-story frame house on the same lot where their log cabin stood. The house was located along the main highway that went through town called the “National Road” (today – U.S. 40). At the time, Greenfield was a small village, and heavy forests surrounded the area. Bud had a birds-eye view of the travel on that road as well as some of the colorful characters that came into town and into his life.

Bud also saw the coming and going of the great Civil War. In 1860, at the age of 11, James Whitcomb Riley – now called “Jim” saw his father leave home to serve as a captain in a unit that came from Greenfield. Financially, this was a difficult time for the Rileys, as Reuben could spare little money to send home to his wife and family. However, Elizabeth, who was always very compassionate, took in a young girl named Mary Alice Smith in the winter of 1862. The girl stayed with the Rileys and did chores to earn her board and keep. Mary Alice liked to enchant the Riley children with wondrous and sometimes spooky tales that she would tell them before they retired to bed. This little girl – “Little Orphan Allie”- would ultimately become the character for one of Riley’s most famous poems, “Little Orphant Annie.”

After the Civil War, Reuben Riley returned to Greenfield, but he never truly recovered financially or physically from his wartime service. Due to his faltering law practice and some poor land investments, Reuben was forced to sell his house. Jim Riley commented in later years, “We were poor. So poor we had to move into a cheerless house in the edge of a cornfield, our homestead having been lost.” To further complicate matters, there was a growing gap between father and son. Young Riley had no heart for school. He enjoyed writing rhymes, drawing, playing the fiddle and acting in local dramas. Reuben wanted Jim to become a lawyer. Then in 1870 Elizabeth Riley, Jim’s mother and primary supporter, died suddenly. It was a loss that would affect Riley for the rest of his life. John, Jim’s older brother wrote in his diary, “What shall we do with Jim now that mother is dead?”

Riley quit school in 1870. His father, concerned that young Jim would have no occupation, paid for Jim to do an apprenticeship with a sign painter. Riley did well, but the call of traveling medicine shows was much more appealing. It was with these shows that Riley recited stories, did impressions, played guitar and sang. However, the work was sporadic and temporary at best, and Riley frequently suffered for lack of funds. But, it was with the medicine shows that he learned to act while having time to write his verses.

In 1877, he was hired to edit a weekly newspaper, *The Anderson Democrat*, in Anderson, Ind. He became very popular with the readers by spicing up dull copy, and within four weeks the newspaper’s circulation had doubled. Convinced that his poems were noteworthy, but frustrated by the frequent rejections that he was getting from newspaper and magazine editors in the east, Riley was

determined to prove the quality of his poetry. He purposely wrote a poem entitled “*Leonaine*” and had it published in the *Kokomo Dispatch* as a long-lost work of Edgar Allan Poe. Newspapers around the nation reprinted the poem, which in turn launched a major, nationwide literary discussion on its high quality and whether it was truly a work of Poe’s. However, Riley was ultimately exposed by a rival newspaper and was widely disparaged by editors and literary critics. Although he proved his point, he also lost his job.

Ironically, the publicity Riley received from the “*Leonaine*” incident ultimately helped launch him to fame. He soon found that his name was well known throughout the state, and he began to draw bigger and bigger crowds at his performances. Weekly newspapers also started showing an interest in publishing his work, and eventually the *Indianapolis Journal* asked him to join their staff full-time as their resident poet.

During the winter of 1880 – 1881, Riley started touring throughout Indiana. He performed wherever he could, in school halls and in skating rinks. His expressions on stage held audiences spellbound. “He held a literally unmatched power over his audience for riotous laughter or for actual copious tears; and no one whoever saw an exhibition of that power will forget it—or him. There he stood, alone upon the stage, a blond, shortish, whimsical man in evening clothes . . . suddenly face and figure altered, seemed to merge completely . . . a Hoosier farm hand, perhaps or a thin little girl.” – author, Booth Tarkington

By 1883, Riley published his first book, *The Old Swimmin’-Hole and ‘Leven More Poems*. This collection of verse was written in dialect and created an immediate sensation in the state. During the next twenty-five years, Riley wrote hundreds of verses in dialect, but he never completely abandoned “correct” English. Riley wrote more than 1,000 poems in his lifetime and published more than 90 books. By the late 1880s he was in such demand as a speaker that he traveled several months a year giving public readings, but the literary critics in the east continued to ignore him.

In 1887, Riley was invited to speak at a program sponsored by the International Copyright League. He was to be joined by other distinguished writers including Mark Twain and William Dean Howells. Riley chose to recite, “*When the Frost is on the Punkin,*” and it so delighted the crowd that they asked him to come back the next night. At this performance, James Russell Lowell, one of America’s most respected poets, introduced him. Lowell remarked that he had been so impressed with Riley the day before that he stayed up most of the night reading his work. “I can say to you of my own knowledge that you are to have the pleasure of listening to the voice of a true poet.” Lowell’s tribute signaled that the nation’s literary elite had at last accepted Riley, and soon his works were being read from Maine to California.

Riley traveled the lecture circuit for most of the 1880s and 1890s. He became wealthy enough to buy back his childhood home in Greenfield by 1893, but he never had a permanent residence there. Instead, he chose to be a paying guest at the home of Major and Mrs. Charles L. Holstein in the little Indianapolis neighborhood called Lockerbie. It was in Lockerbie where everyone from the famous to schoolchildren would come to visit the Hoosier Poet. And, it was at Lockerbie where Riley would pass away on July 22, 1916. Newspapers reported his death throughout the world. President Woodrow Wilson sent personal condolences to the family, and 35,000 mourners passed by his body where it lay in state under the dome of the State Capitol building. James Whitcomb Riley was buried on the highest hill in Indianapolis in Crown Hill Cemetery.

Riley was a man in the Golden Age of Indiana Literature from 1850 – 1920. This was most apparent in the fact that at that time, the number of best-selling books by Indiana authors exceeded those from any other state with the exception of New York. In fact, Riley was considered one of the most popular of all of the authors from Indiana’s Golden Age. By 1894, the royalties on Riley’s books reportedly earned him more money than any other American poet except Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The success of Riley’s appeal was the “Hoosier Character” that he brought to America. According to author Barbara Olenyik Morrow, “He was their spokesman, the poet who understood them and whom they could understand. He immortalized their simple virtues, celebrated their natural speech, and recorded their lives.” James Whitcomb Riley made Indiana and Hoosiers the epitome of the American ideal.

#### **Additional Resources:**

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Van Allen, Elizabeth J. *James Whitcomb Riley A Life*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999.